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# Yemen: Civil War or Transnational Crime?

## Abstract

The ongoing war in Yemen, which has already displaced millions of people, possesses some typical traits that suggest its inclusion among the deadly conflicts known as “civil wars.” This article will review briefly the components that characterize these types of conflicts and, after providing a summary of recent events, will attempt to identify the aspects that render the conflict in Yemen an anomalous civil war. It will be contended that, given the anomalies observed, the war in Yemen can also be described as a form of transnational crime.

## Key words

civil war; networks; proxy wars; transnational crime; Yemen

## Introduction

Since 1945, twenty-five million people have died in civil combat, while millions more have been wounded, displaced or impoverished (Armitage, 2017). Ideas, definitions and understandings of civil war have always been volatile and contested. What is also controversial is where exactly in history the analysis of this type of political violence should begin.

In ancient Greece, there was a sharp distinction between violent conflict against external enemies (*polemos*) and among or within cities (*stasis*). The former was deemed a source of potential glory, while the latter a cause of ruin and decline. *Polemos* constituted a form of international politics, *stasis* a form of calamitous anti-politics (Esposito 2018). But it is with events which occurred in ancient Rome that the origin of civil war is commonly identified.

In 87 BC, two main factions fought for power in Rome—the “optimates” (patricians) and the “populares” (plebeians)—and the confrontation between them ended in a horrendous bloodshed known in history as the civil war of Marius and Sulla (Abbott 1902). Scholars mention this conflict as the main source for the study of ancient civil war, although they also refer to Caesar’s (2006) three books that cover the period between 49 and 48 BC, when the then Governor of Gaul described himself as the victim of a conspiracy being hatched in Rome. As the terms of his mandate in Gaul expired, Caesar was called back to Rome to face charges of corruption. Such charges were pressed by his political enemies, including Pompeius, Scipio and Marcus Cicero, with whom Caesar initially attempted to reach an accommodation. But the power struggle led to military battles that spread to Greece and Egypt, where Pompeius was allegedly killed. Lucan (1989), the Roman poet, noted that the wounds inflicted by the

hand of fellow-citizens sink deeper, and that civil wars are to politics what sickness is to the body—both destroy from within.

When the study of civil war takes ancient Rome as a starting point, it is assumed that this type of political violence can occur only if a distinct citizenry and political community has been established—in other words, if a *civitas* has been created. In the current time, instead, civil wars seem to proliferate due to the absence of a *civitas*, becoming the most destructive form of organized human violence. One could object, however, that the designation, “civil war,” is normally applied to unsuccessful rebellions or uprisings that defy established governments and states. Indeed, we celebrate some such uprisings as exercises of people’s right to determine their political destiny, but we condemn others as illegal rebellions that deserve to be suppressed at all costs. By labeling a conflict “civil war,” commentators perhaps intend to deny *any* form of legitimacy to violent struggles, but were such struggles to prove successful, they would not be termed civil wars at all. Large violent conflicts within national territories may start with riots and insurrections, and then take the shape of a civil war, whereby citizens support one side or the other. But if the challenging party triumphs, the new appellation becomes “revolution.” As Colley (2017:43) puts it, “[r]evolution possesses far more positive connotations than the more grubby and ambivalent civil war.”

Wars within states appear to characterize the last sixty years of global history—an unprecedented shift in the pattern of violent human conflict for centuries. Armitage (2017:7), for example, notes that while estimates differ, “since 1945 there have been 259 conflicts around the world that have risen to the level of a war, and the vast majority of those were internal conflicts.” Inauspicious predictions indicate that climate change, while drawing countries into conflict in pursuit of new resources (inter-state conflict) will also multiply and intensify civil wars (intra-state conflict) (Lee 2009).

Regarded as non-international in character, civil war can be defined as a conflict which erupts within a national territory where a faction aims to violently replace an established authority or secede from it (Ruggiero 2019). Let us assess how the features of the Yemeni conflict lend themselves to this definition. After providing a summary of recent events, this article will attempt to identify the aspects that render the Yemeni an anomalous civil war. It will be contended that, given the anomalies observed, the war in Yemen can also be described as a form of transnational crime.

### **Houthis and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition**

When the Arab Spring touched Yemen, the Houthi movement managed to force its longtime ineffective dictator to resign. The uprising led by this Zaidi Shia Muslim minority in 2011 resulted in Ali Abdullah Saleh handing power to his deputy, Abdrabbuh Hadi. The new president proved equally ineffective, particularly in dealing with attacks by jihadists, corruption and food scarcity. The growing institutional instability provided the Houthis with the opportunity to

occupy and claim governmental control of their northern heartland in the Saada province and neighboring areas. Many other Yemenis, including disillusioned Sunnis, supported the new rulers and, between late 2014 and early 2015, the Sanaa governorate was conquered. The Houthi movement then tried to spread its influence across the whole country, occupying southern areas and forcing Mr. Hadi to flee abroad (BBC, 21 March 2019).

Given the Houthis' perceived ideological proximity to Iranian Shia power, traditional and current rival-enemy Saudi Arabia set up a coalition with the intent of restoring Hadi's rule. The coalition included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar, Senegal, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Logistical and intelligence support was soon received from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and France. The Houthis, in turn, were supported by Iran.

In August 2015, the coalition defeated the Houthis and their allies stationed in the southern regions of Yemen, capturing the port city of Aden, where a provisional government was established. While Hadi remained in exile, Yemenis were denied basic survival goods and security, while the Houthis consolidated their occupation of Sanaa and began to fire ballistic missiles across the border into Saudi Arabia. Now rudderless, Yemen became fighting ground for members of al-Qaeda and their rivals, namely local militants of Islamic State, who vied in seizing territories in the south of the country. Restrictions on imports imposed by the coalition with a view to preventing the smuggling of weapons resulted in a blockade impeding the delivery of food and medicine by charitable organizations. According to a report released by Amnesty International (2019), more than 3 million people—including 2 million children—became acutely malnourished, rendering them more vulnerable to disease. An estimated 85,000 have died between April 2015 and October 2018, almost 20 million people lack access to adequate healthcare and nearly 18 million do not have enough clean water or access to adequate sanitation. In 2018, some 500,000 people were suspected of having contracted cholera. The war has displaced more than 3.3 million from their homes (Amnesty International 2019).

The involvement of disparate groups guided by their own creed and interest generated a chaotic situation, which was compounded by infighting among pro-government forces. This happened in November 2017, when clashes over the control of Sanaa's biggest mosque caused dozens of deaths.

To be clear, *all parties* involved committed violations of international law and war crimes. The Saudi Arabia-led coalition supporting the internationally recognized Yemeni government continued to bomb civilian infrastructure and carried out indiscriminate attacks, killing and injuring civilians. The Houthi forces shelled residential areas randomly, while all engaged in illegal detention practices, torture and summary executions. Widespread lawlessness led to the use of anti-personnel landmines and the recruitment of children as soldiers, in violation of international law, while targets included markets, schools and funeral gatherings. Women and girls faced all forms of violence and boys as young as eight were raped, some in mosques (McCourt 2019).

A chronology of events, punctuated by the description of alliances, betrayals and detailed information about the actors involved and their meandering agendas is available in a number of publications (Hill 2017; International Crisis Group 2017; Salisbury 2017; Transfeld 2016; Yadav and Lynch 2018). For the purpose of this article, however, it is appropriate to select from the information available and focus on the arms markets and transfers that accompanied and still foster the conflict.

## **Small arms**

Yemen, a small Middle Eastern country with approximately thirty million people, one of the poorest Arab countries, is heavily armed, causing the death, prior to the conflict, of up to 1,200 people annually. Long before the eruption of the civil war, governments showed stark inability to control the arms trade, in part because the country was divided into the Yemeni Arab Republic, supported by the US and Saudi Arabia, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, backed by the former Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR) (CIA 2016). Weapon hoarding was a by-product of the Cold War. Estimates indicate that there are approximately fifteen million small arms in Yemen— one weapon for every two persons (Keefe 2017). The figure becomes even more staggering when taking into account the fact that forty percent of the Yemeni population is under the age of fourteen. Moreover, considering that cultural norms do not permit women to possess guns, it can be suggested that almost every able-bodied Yemeni man above the age of fourteen has access to or possesses multiple small arms (Keefe 2017; Warburton 2016).

Some of these weapons, which belonged to previous foreign forces occupying the country, are still in circulation. The Chinese and Soviet governments, for instance, supplied the People's Democratic Republic, while the US armed the Arab Republic. Moreover, between 1996 and 2000, Yemen legally imported fifty million dollars of small arms from Argentina, Brazil, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, South Africa and Spain. More recently, Houthi rebels gained possession of US vehicles and Marine Corps weaponry when the US abandoned its embassy in the country (Sisk 2015).

With the start of the conflict and the consequent international ban on military exports to Yemen, illicit transactions allowed the flow of arms to continue and expand. The techniques commonly in use for illegal transfers of arms were and are still used, including the falsification of end users, whereby consignments are delivered officially to authorized recipients and then diverted to unauthorized customers (Gilby 2009; Ruggiero 2000). Such customers include non-state actors (Bastien Olivera 2014).

The illicit trade, in brief, thrives in parallel with the civil war—at the same time, its product and its cause. Interviews conducted by Al Yasiri (2014) revealed that residents could provide for their family for six months by selling one AK-47 rifle. As the war escalated and as living conditions crumbled, civilians

began to supplement income by selling arms. Dealers started using social media sites to advertise their goods, while in some cases, underpaid military officials used their position to acquire small arms legally to then sell them illicitly (Al Yasiri 2014).

It could be asserted that civil wars last longer than other violent conflicts because those involved feel they will not survive defeat. In Yemen, however, the long duration of the civil war can be explained, in part, by the existence of a prosperous arms market in which combatants and civilians alike participate. When Saudi Arabia was granted the support of the US in starting the bombardment of Yemen, diplomats and military personnel assured their powerful ally that the campaign would be over within six weeks (Niarchos 2018). Wittingly or otherwise, they underestimated the driving force of the arms illicit market, which, in fact, was destined to enlarge thanks to the involvement of western countries.

### **Arming peace**

Arms sales by western countries to Saudi Arabia were and continue to be denounced widely, from investigative journalists to nongovernmental organizations to unions. For example, in the French port of Le Havre, unionized protesters stopped a consignment of weapons destined for Saudi Arabia; a similar protest took place later in the Italian port of Genoa (Al Bawaba, 21 May 2019). The French investigative website, *Disclose*, published leaked documents that showed Saudi Arabia using French weapons against civilians, including tanks and laser-guided missile systems. The 15-page classified report written by France's military intelligence agency and made public by *Disclose*, included maps that provided details of the positioning of French-made weapons inside Yemen and on the Saudi side of the border. Faced with growing criticism, French President Emmanuel Macron admitted that the weapons were indeed being used, but only on the Saudi border and for defensive purposes (Lough and Irish 2019). The intelligence document, however, stated that Caesar cannons, manufactured by French company Newter and deployed along the Saudi-Yemeni frontier, conducted "defensive shelling" of Houthi forces while positioned within Saudi territory, showing that the Yemen could be well be bombed without invading its territory. Satellite images, video and photographs taken by civilians revealed some Leclerc tanks bought by the UAE had taken part in coalition offensives. Moreover, The Caesar artillery guns have a 42 km range and can reach the northern regions of Yemen, as can the Mirage 2000, positioned on the border. Some 500,000 Yemenis were said to live within the range of French artillery placed on the Saudi-Yemen border (Press TV 2019). Finally, two French-built ships participated in the blockade of Yemeni ports that led to food and medical shortages and the humanitarian crisis referred to above.

France is a signatory of the United Nations (UN) Arms Trade Treaty that regulates the international transfer of conventional weapons and bans the sale of military equipment that fuel human rights violations or war crimes. Germany, too, is a signatory and imposed an embargo on arms exports to Saudi Arabia over

the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which compounded concerns over Riyadh's role in the Yemen war. The move drew criticism from the arms industry and from France and Britain, which saw it as an obstacle to their "peaceful project" in the area (Lough and Irish 2019). Weapons, in brief, were meant to "arm peace."

In countries like Britain and France, officials regard arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia and its key partner, the UAE, as critically important for keeping military influence in the Middle East and, at the same time, for preserving thousands of jobs. Saudi Arabia is France's second-biggest customer in the sector after Egypt. The UK, on the other hand, accounts for 23% of arms imports by Saudi Arabia and in 2018 the two countries signed a multibillion-pound preliminary order for the transfer of 48 Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets. According to figures analyzed by the advocacy group, Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the UK has licensed nearly £5 billion in weapons to Saudi Arabia since the bombing of Yemen began in 2015 (AFP 2019).

Regarding the role of the US in military procurement in the area, it should be recalled that, in November 2015, despite skepticism toward the Saudi war plan and evidence of heavy civilian casualties, the Obama Administration agreed to a giant weapons sale totaling US\$1.29 billion. As Niarchos (2018:3) reports, "[b]y the end of Obama's Presidency, the US had offered more than a hundred and fifteen billion dollars worth of arms to Saudi Arabia, the largest amount under any President, including warships, air-defense systems and tanks." But the history of large-scale arms sales to Saudi Arabia begins in the late 1960s, when American producers and politicians were alarmed by French and Soviet competition in arming the Arab-Israeli conflicts (Bronson 2006). Lobbyists persuaded the US government that arms sales were crucial for stability of the region, the fight against international terrorism, and as a counterbalance to the power of Iran. One modality used by the US for weapon transfers consists of appointing American experts based in the receiving country and tasking them with the assemblage and maintenance of the arms. In this way, at least theoretically, they can be dismantled in the event that the side the US wishes to support—in this case, the Saudis—shifts its political allegiance. In 2016, the maintenance contract for the Royal Saudi Air Force's two hundred and thirty F-15 fighter jets alone was worth US\$2.5 billion. President Obama, in brief, continued the traditional amicable relationship with Saudi Arabia cultivated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Riedel 2018).

Arming stability, and therefore peace, continued under President Donald J. Trump, whose business deals and personal connections with Saudi Arabia predate his entrance into office. In 2017, Trump announced a US\$110 billion arms deal with the Saudi government and, reversing the decision of the Obama Administration, precision-guided missiles were included in the package. "Jobs, jobs, jobs," Trump is alleged to have claimed. When a funeral was attacked in the city of Sana'a, killing over a hundred and forty mourners, however, few comments were heard about the devastation caused by those "jobs." The bomb used was a Mark-82 produced by Raytheon, the third largest defense company in the US and had been modified with a laser guidance system, made in factories in

Arizona and Texas (Niarchos 2018). Among the victims many were supporters of the official government.

### **International wrongful acts**

The European Union (EU) and the UN have attempted repeatedly to regulate the transfer of arms. For example, the Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security, an independent research center based in Brussels, Belgium, has pressed for the creation of a pan-European watchdog to regulate arm brokering and to control the trade in ammunition. Some national governments, however, have often claimed that regulation is costly and ineffective, while others have provided their own interpretation of existing norms and subjectively defined what is acceptable in the arms business (GRIP 2009, 2012). The ambiguity of regulations offers ample choice, as for example those enunciated in the UN Arms Trade Treaty, noted above (UNODA 2014). The UN Arms Trade Treaty does not mandate that countries stop exporting weapons to countries at war. It requires only that governments carry out *assessments* that their weapons will not contribute to war crimes. Presumably, UK, the US and France have concluded that there is no reason to stop their exports, unless evidence can be produced of their gross negligence or of the intention to promote war crimes. As Dodman (2019:3) puts it, “[i]nternational law says you have to be very careful, but it is hard to prove that one hasn’t been careful.”

In 2001, the International Law Commission, established by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and tasked with promoting the codification of international law, stressed that a state which assists another state in the commission of an internationally wrongful act is responsible for having done so. But it clarifies that the former must be aware of the purpose and use of the assistance given. In other words, complicity between countries providing weapons and countries receiving them is a charge that can be leveled only when the former have knowledge that what they provide will be used against civilians, against humanity, for genocidal purposes and the commissions of other war crimes (Aust 2011).

Whether legal or illegal, arms transfers can always fuel atrocities (Amnesty International 2017). Research on illicit arms trafficking has identified some constant features. First, there are arms manufacturers and financial institutions supporting them. The former have permanent contact with officials and security services, whose role includes the monitoring of the quality and quantity of arms produced. Second, there are mediators and wholesale traders and, third, there are politicians who take decisions regarding the transfer of arms abroad. They are in charge of ensuring that weapons reach the intended customers and that embargoes imposed on certain countries are respected. The arms business, therefore, may become illegal in a number of ways. The illegality may reside in the quality and quantity of arms produced, which are subject to international restrictions and regulations, or may consist of false claims regarding the recipient country (UNODA 2014). In this respect, one must recall



that the arming of Iraq by British producers took place exactly through such false claims (Phythian 1997; Ruggiero 2000).

In Yemen, an Egyptian journalist spent a year tracing and documenting the origin of weapons that ended up in the country. He created social media accounts using false Yemeni names to get access to the informal trading networks and groups. In some cases the sellers were at pains to emphasize that the weapons were brand new and had never been fired. Weighty evidence was collected that Gulf states have been passing arms sold to their military on to *all factions* at war in Yemen, clearly in breach of “end user” certification laws intended to ensure that exported arms are not passed on to third parties (Aboelgheit 2018).

In addition, arms destined for rebel groups arrive from Iran, due to the inability of government to monitor Yemen’s 1,500-kilometer border. Smuggling in Yemen is no longer limited to Yemenis or regional smugglers: non-Arab foreigners engage in it too (al-Sayaghi 2014).

The arms trade, however, may become legitimate when incomplete or unassembled weapons are transferred and then put together in loco (see the US example above). The transfer of dual-use technology that can be appropriate for civil as well as military production is also permissible under international law. In this way, the country importing the technology will be in a position to produce and use arms in its own territory and sell them to third countries. Hence, for instance, the proliferation of arms factories in several African countries (GunPolicy.org 2019). This process, known as “arms saturation,” is also visible in Latin American countries (Ruggiero 2000).

In sum, we are faced with networks of actors and strategies that transcend the actual contexts in which civil wars take place. The events occurring in Yemen hide dynamics that can be unraveled only by looking elsewhere. The country seems to be the theater of internal conflict but also of transnational criminal activity. In order to ascertain this dual character of the violence that is devastating Yemen, it may be worth now returning to other definitional factors that emerge from the debate on civil wars.

### **A regional war complex**

According to a quantitative definition, civil war is “sustained military combat, primarily internal, resulting in at least 1000 battle deaths per year” (Armitage 2017: 217). Econometric studies use a coding rule based on battle deaths associated with internal conflicts. Designed to facilitate researchers in the creation of a usable dataset for analytical purposes, this quantitative definition does not consider the spatial and temporal aspects of large-scale violence. The former aspect refers to the participation of numerically large groups of citizens, while the latter to the duration of the violent conflict. These two variables give rise to a different interpretive model that looks at “regional war complexes” rather than civil wars—with the former being characterized by the participation

of “foreigners” (Gersovitz and Kriger 2013). The focus, in this case, is on the individuals and groups who are neither inhabitants nor citizens of a country where large-scale violence is occurring, but may be involved directly in the conflict or limit their role to the provision of arms, bases or other forms of assistance. As Gersovitz and Kriger (2013:173) explain, “[a] regional war complex has high foreign participation, and domestic participation inside at least one of the countries involved in the violent conflict must be high enough to challenge the government’s monopoly of force in that country.”

Adopting this definition, the international aspect of civil wars assumes a crucial role. The international element, however, can play a part if external forces are invited to support one of the fighting factions or both. In the past, ideology tended to shape regional war complexes, such as with the support by communist countries for liberation struggles in Africa and elsewhere. Today, by contrast, the involvement of “foreigners” may be led by material and geopolitical interests that transcend political philosophies, let alone legality. Moreover, civil wars can also be caused directly by external forces, as in the cases of Iraq and Libya. Detailed studies such as the one produced by Regan (2002) have examined the conditions under which the intervention of third parties succeeds in stopping civil wars. Successful interventions are said to necessitate consent of the fighting parties involved, impartiality on the part of interveners, and the existence of a coherent strategy. None of these conditions obtains in Yemen, where foreign powers, through involvement in transnational crime, do not stop but exacerbate the civil war.

In the current context, then, due to growing human mobility and the infinite connections between national states and communities, one could argue that *all wars* are civil wars. Perhaps this is the sense of Foucault’s (2001) argument whereby civil war does not indicate the dissolution but the daily exercise of power. It is worth testing this hypothesis with regard to Yemen.

## **Proxy wars**

Western governments have long operated in the Middle East with the aim of establishing military alliances there. Economic and political interests have guided the development of loyal forces in the area, resulting in a steep increase in arms imports. In 2017, seven of the world’s ten highest spenders on military equipment were Middle Eastern states (Sipri 2018). Saudi Arabia was the third largest spender in the world, having increased its purchases by 74% between 2008 and 2015, totaling a US\$69.4 billion expense in 2017—namely, 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. The country is involved in regional conflicts through the provision of support to rebel groups in Syria and military assistance to groups operating in Iran and Qatar. The proxy wars wielded by Saudi Arabia has led the country to plan the development of an indigenous arms industry which, by 2030, is expected to localize 50 percent of the production of military equipment within its territory. The country remains highly dependent on arms imports, however, while the national military industry is expected to build on imported technology and expertise.

The armament of Saudi Arabia increased during the 1990s, when the US supplied the country with seventy-two F-15S combat aircrafts, which were replaced in 2016 by the improved version known as F-15SA. Cruise missiles with a 280-km range (SLAM-ER) were added in the same year, along with a variety of guided bombs. The UK supplied Tornado combat aircrafts throughout the 1990s, and these were upgraded in the period 2007-2013 and enabled to carry new guided weapons, such as Storm Shadow cruise missiles, which have a range of at least 250 kilometers. Finally, the main suppliers of arms to Saudi Arabia, for the 2013-2017 period, were the US (61 percent), the UK (23 percent) and France (3.6 percent).

In addition, it should be noted that lack of transparency relating to military spending prevents the depiction of the precise quantity and quality of the arms imported; moreover, it is unknown to what extent military spending is triggered by government officials pursuing personal gain from bribes and other types of hidden monetary incentives (Sipri 2018). What is known is that eighty-two percent of the deaths or injuries resulting from Saudi airstrikes were civilians (Amnesty International 2019).

### **Transnational crime**

Foucault contended that civil wars constitute a form of daily exercise of power rather than a mere destructive clash between groups sharing a specific national territory. When applied to the Yemeni situation described so far, this perspective needs some modification. In Yemen, power is exercised not only by a national state, but also by external forces pursuing geopolitical and material goals. The proxy war fought in the country locates the Yemeni conflict in the category of “regional war complexes,” characterized by the participation of a variety of individual and collective “foreign” actors. Among these are arms producers, traders, politicians, external enemies and competitors—all engaged in establishing mutually beneficial relationships with internal Yemeni forces. The configuration of these relationships and the networks within which they take place bear a substantial similarity to those informing transnational crime. It is worth identifying some elements within the debate on this type of crime in order to ascertain whether they can befit the type of civil war being fought in Yemen.

Transnational crime is associated with the threats posed by illegal cross-border activities. From a conventional perspective, the focus is on those offenses whose inception, prevention and effects involve more than one country, while concerns revolve around the feeling of vulnerability that developed countries harbor towards externally-originated criminal activity, mainly from developing countries. An example of this new version of “alien conspiracy theory” is offered by authors who claim that “organized crime in the post-cold-war era presents an array of complex and novel challenges to the US security interests” (Lee III 1996: 6). From a different perspective, transnational crime is founded on alliances between diverse actors and entails the production of a mixture of white-collar and conventional criminal practices. Dispersed participants and diverse forces

are involved in networks in which opportunistic chances are taken and short-term or long-term joint ventures are set up. In brief, those involved operate in developing as well as in developed countries.

This characterization was already clear in 1975, when transnational crime appeared on the UN agenda, described as acts performed by a complex web of illicit partnerships and alliances between violent groups, corporate actors and corrupt politicians. Those involved in what was termed “crime as business” included, therefore, individuals endowed with power and high social status who misused legitimate techniques of business and industry (UN 1975). Further aspects were identified in 1995 and 2000, when among the features of transnational crime, the variables mobility, partnership and network were foregrounded (UN 1995; 2000). *Mobility* referred to the increasing opportunities to access markets offered to white-collar and conventional criminals, while *partnership* alluded to the joint ventures set up by the two. Finally, the variable, *network*, described consortia involving a range of individuals and groups whose different background does not constitute an obstacle to the pursuit of common tasks. Transnational networks, it was suggested, are fluid, highly adaptable and resilient; they epitomize the intermingling of the local with the global.

The forces operating in Yemen constitute a variant of such transnational networks, as they participate in a common enterprise while pursuing their own specific task and promoting their own cultural, political and professional identity. Houthi rebels and their allies, the Saudi-led coalition, local officials and their partners in the western world—all are participants in transnational criminal acts. The network in which they operate may be characterized by “weak links” in the sense that there is no central organization that coordinates the activity of the different components. But perhaps for this very reason, the violent acts committed are harder to control both in their typology and intensity. This happens when participation is open and, in Yemen, may even be fostered by a preexisting gun culture that makes small arms readily available to all. In brief, in Yemen, transnational crime as a form of civil war is alimented by networks of material and political interest which are relatively open. In this way, every component is given the opportunity to create and foster participation by more allies and accomplices who are further removed from the war scene. Strong ties characterize limited affiliation, whereas the “strength of weak ties” causes a widening of the network and produces unpredictable human costs (Granovetter 1973).

## Conclusion

The horrors of civil warfare are narrated in holy books and often understood as forms of punishment inflicted on disbelievers and sinners. The violent clashes that killed over twenty million Chinese in the 1850s and 1860s—the so-called Taiping Rebellion, for example—were often interpreted as divine retribution for immoral, decadent, or irreligious behavior (Meyer-Fong 2013). Carnages were rationalized in these terms, particularly by illiterate people, who would turn to

the gods to make sense of their suffering, find the way to moral values, and evade divine condemnation.

In order to make sense of their suffering, Yemenis will have, more realistically, to question the role played by internal and external forces engaged in illegal activity affecting them. As victims of a civil war substantially akin to transnational crime, the people of Yemen do not witness a two-sided confrontation but are faced with a plethora of diverse actors and motivating drives that make the end of conflicts problematic. Hannah Arendt (2016) warned that, in post-conflict contexts, institutions allowing individuals and groups to participate in collective decision-making should be put in place immediately. Without such participatory institutions, conflict will not stop, but will intensify. Perhaps this is why the conflict in Yemen seems never-ending, as participation in collective decision-making in the country is made particularly hard by the multiplicity, diversity and unwillingness of those involved.

Yemen shows that many violent acts carried out during civil wars possess an ambiguous nature, as they reveal a political as well as a private motivation. Of course, the events taking place in the country testify to the breakdown of authority and the emergence of violently competing motivations, manifested through random explosions of self-interest. These events echo Thucydides' (2000) classic description of civil wars that drown in ungovernable passions: he uses words such as "confusion," "enmity," and "revenge"—all connected to a process of privatization of violence.

Civil wars may have a "master cleavage," but often end up exposing local or private issues. The Yemeni conflict, while revealing the existence of a master cleavage between rebels and the coalition fighting them, brings to the fore illicit cross-border practices, business illegality and a process of privatization of violence well described in classical texts. A form of transnational crime, the conflict demonstrates that civil wars are not merely fought by conflicting groups and organizations, but also by a variety of actors pursuing diverse goals. Different identities and interests are involved in acts of violence that straddle the divide between the individual and the collective, political ideology and private gain.

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